

Remarks to the House Democratic Caucus Issues Conference in
Williamsburg, Virginia
February 3, 2007

Thank you all. It's nice to be here. Thank you very much. The last time I looked at some of your faces, I was at the State of the Union, and I saw kind of a strange expression when I referred to something as the "Democrat Party." Now, look, my diction isn't all that good. [*Laughter*] I have been accused of occasionally mangling the English language. [*Laughter*] And so I appreciate you inviting the head of the Republican Party.

Thanks for having me, Madam Speaker. I'm proud to be here. I'm proud to have met your grandchild. I know the mother well. [*Laughter*] If the child has as much spunk as the mother, she's [he's]* going to have a fantastic life. And so thank you for having me.

I want to thank the members for allowing me to come. I'm looking forward to visiting with you. I particularly want to thank your families. I know how hard it is on a family to support a loved one in public life. It takes a lot of sacrifice to encourage your spouse to serve the country. Politics can be ugly. Sometimes they say not nice things about you in the local newspaper. You're traveling a lot. Campaigns are rough on a family. And so I really want to thank—I thank the members for serving, but I know full well that you couldn't serve without the love and support of your family members. So I really appreciate your contribution to the country.

Madam Speaker, I thank you very much for your leadership. I was genuinely touched when I thought about how your dad would be reacting to seeing you sitting up there in the House Chamber. It was an historic moment, and I know you're proud of the accomplishments, and I appre-

ciate you all supporting this fine woman into a really important leadership role.

On the way in, we spent a little time talking about Florida, and I talked to the Governor yesterday. The Speaker was concerned, as am I, to make sure that the folks get the help they need down there. And, Madam Speaker, you and I, and every member here, shares concerns for those whose lives were turned upside down by that storm. And as I told you earlier, and told the Governor, whatever Federal response is needed, we will make it quick and sure. And so thank you for your concerns.

I'm glad to be here with Steny Hoyer. Good to see you. Thank you, Steny. He is a down-to-earth, no-nonsense guy. I'm looking forward to working with you. James Clyburn and Rahm Emanuel and John Larson and all the leadership, I'm looking forward to working with you. I know you've probably heard that, and you doubt whether it's true. It's true. We can do some big things together. In order to do big things, we're going to have to do it together.

So I'd like to share some of the thoughts about the big things I'd like to see us try to accomplish. First, balancing the budget—that's a big thing. Rob Portman is going to submit a budget tomorrow. Some of it you'll like; some of it you won't like; but it achieves the goal that we have said, which is to balance the budget. And we will show you how to do so in 5 years. You will have your own ideas, and we can work together, hopefully, to achieve that big goal.

Inherent in the budget issue is whether or not—is unfunded liabilities as a part of entitlement programs. This is a difficult issue for members of both parties. I fully understand it's hard to come to the table to address Social Security or Medicare, the

* White House correction.

unfunded liabilities inherent in those programs. I've asked members of my party to come to the table with ideas. I will bring ideas. I ask members of the Democratic Party to come to the table as well.

I believe we have an obligation to work to solve the problem. Is it going to be hard work? You bet it's hard work. A lot of times people say, "Well, why don't we just wait for the crisis to come upon us?" Well, I think the crisis is here. That's why I've included reforms of entitlement in every State of the Union Address. And I'm going to keep talking—well, I've got one more left. I'll keep talking about it for the next time as well. Hopefully, I won't have to, if we're able to sit and come together. But I'm under no illusions of how hard it's going to be. The only thing I want to share with you is, is my desire to see if we can't work together to get it done.

Secondly, there's a great goal and—to make sure every child has got the foundation necessary to be able to enjoy the great opportunities our country affords. As you know, I am a big believer in the No Child Left Behind Act. I think it has worked. I fully recognize that some have got concerns about it, and I'm willing to work with both Republicans and Democrats to address those concerns. My only admonition is, let us don't water down the accountability inherent in this good law that enables us to detect problems early so we can solve the problems, before it's too late.

Secondly, I know we can work together on passing the American Competitiveness Initiative, aimed at making sure that math and science is more prevalent amongst our youngsters and doubling the amount of basic research at the Federal level, which will enable our country to remain the most innovative country in the world.

Thirdly, we've got to make sure people have got health insurance. I mentioned this in the State of the Union. I believe the role of the Federal Government is to help the poor, the disabled, and the elderly, and we will work with you to make sure that's

happened. But I also think it's very important to figure out why health insurance is less affordable and less available for more of our citizens.

I believe part of the reason is because the Tax Code discourages private individuals from being able to purchase health care. I ask you to carefully consider the idea that we have put out. I've already heard from some members who thought it was a lousy idea; I understand that. But please look at it in depth as a way to address an issue that concerns us all, and that is, not enough people having health insurance.

Secondly, I strongly believe the States are the proper laboratories for change. And I think it makes sense to encourage innovation at the State level, in terms of helping people on Medicaid get health insurance, helping the poor get health insurance, making sure that we develop risk pools to enable those who cannot afford insurance because of health reasons have coverage. Anyway, it's a comprehensive approach that addresses a common goal of ours.

Thirdly, I set a goal to reduce our gasoline use by 20 percent over the next 10 years. And I thank you very much for receiving the idea that the country has advanced enough technologically to be able to have a mandatory fuel standard that encourages the use of renewables and alternatives, up to 37 billion gallons by 2017. We have spent a lot of money on developing new technologies. I look forward to working with you to continue to do so.

There's some concern, I know, amongst some of the farm State Congressmen that when you use a lot of corn for ethanol, it's going to rise—it's going to cause the feed for hogs and cattle to rise. I've heard loud and clear those complaints. And to a certain extent, they're right. As a matter of fact, that is why we need to spend money on cellulosic ethanol, to make sure that we have got substitutes—[applause]—substitute raw material—in other words, we are able to replace corn as the main raw

material for the ethanol in order to achieve a great goal. And I'm looking forward to working with you on it.

It's an area where we can show the American people that the Republican Party and the Democratic Party has got the capability of enabling us to be able to say to the people: "By being less dependent on oil, we've enhanced our national security, we've helped our economic security, and we've done something positive on the environment."

I believe a great goal is a comprehensive energy—immigration bill. This too is a difficult issue. And in order to get it done, it's going to require Members in the House and the Senate—Republican Members, Democratic Members—finding common ground. And the White House wants to help. I believe strongly in this issue. I know that in order to enforce our border, which all of us wants to—all of us here want to do, that we must have a comprehensive plan to be able to do so.

I believe it is in the Nation's interests to have a temporary-worker program. It's in the interests of small-business owners and farmers to be able to have folks that are willing to do work Americans are not doing, on a temporary basis. I know that in order to enforce this border, we better have a plan that doesn't cause people to sneak in. We want our Border Patrol agents guarding the border from criminals and drug dealers and terrorists, not from folks that are coming to do jobs that Americans aren't doing.

And so this is an important issue. And I repeat to you: I want to work with you on it. I went to the Oval Office to address it, because I believe strongly that we can achieve an objective. I'm under no illusions as to how hard it's going to be, but it will be a lot easier when Republicans and Democrats work together to achieve this important objective.

We share a common goal, and that is to keep America safe. You know, I welcome debate in a time of war, and I hope you

know that. Nor do I consider anybody's—nor do I consider a belief that if you don't happen to agree with me, you don't share the same sense of patriotism I do. You can get that thought out of your mind, if that's what some believe.

These are tough times, and yet there's no doubt in my mind that you want to secure this homeland just as much as I do. You remember the lessons of September the 11th just like I do, and you understand a fundamental obligation of Government is to do everything in our power to protect people here. And I'm looking forward to working with you on that, to make sure our intelligence agencies have what they need to be able to detect problems before they come, to continue to secure the homeland. I believe we can work together in Afghanistan to make sure that former safe haven is able to grow as a democracy.

I put out a plan that has caused a lot of debate on Iraq. I took a lot of time thinking about how best to achieve an objective of a country governing and sustaining and defending itself, a country that will be an ally in this war on terror. I listened to many members here. I listened to members of my own party. I listened to the military and came up with a plan that I genuinely believe has the best chance of succeeding.

I do know we agree on some things, and that is that the Maliki government is going to have to show strong leadership. I appreciate the fact that the Speaker and many of—the distinguished chairman came and briefed me on their trip. She said loud and clear: "Mr. President, you've got to make it clear to the Iraqi people that their Government has got to perform." And I understand, and I agree, Madam Speaker.

There's got to be success not only on the military front—in other words, the Iraqis have got to be taking the lead in Baghdad to secure its capital—but there's also got to be success on the political front. They've got to pass an oil law. They've got

to amend their Constitution so that all segments of that society feel that the Government is for them. They've got to spend our money on reconstruction projects that help unite the country. They've got to have local elections so people feel involved in the Provincial governments. In other words, there's benchmarks that they have got to achieve. And I have made it clear to the Iraqi Government, just like I made it clear to the American people: Our commitment is not open-ended.

We've got other equities in foreign policy that I know we can work together on. I cannot thank you enough for supporting the HIV/AIDS initiative on the continent of Africa. It's a pleasure to be able to stand up in front of the American people and say, "Your tax dollars have made a significant difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people." And this plan would not have been funded without the able leadership and support of many people here in this building, and I appreciate that.

We've set another great goal, and that's to reduce malaria in countries on the continent of Africa. And I'm convinced we can

work together with a—[applause]—strategy that will work. I promised people in my State of the Union that we will continue to pursue freedom in places like Cuba or Belarus or Burma, and that we'll continue to rally the world to stay focused on Darfur.

And so this is a bold agenda for all of us. And I agree, Madam Speaker; there's a chance to show people that we can get beyond the politics of Washington, DC; that we're able to treat each other with civility and, at the same time, accomplish big goals. And so I've come, at your kind invitation, to assure the members that I look forward to working with you in doing the best we possibly can do for the good of all American citizens.

Thank you for having me.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:22 a.m. in Ballroom A at the Kingsmill Resort & Spa. In his remarks, he referred to Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and her grandson, Paul M. Vos, and daughter, Alexandra Pelosi; and Gov. Charles J. Crist, Jr., of Florida.

Remarks Following a Meeting at the House Democratic Caucus Issues Conference in Williamsburg *February 3, 2007*

The President. Speaker, thank you. First of all, thanks for the invitation, Madam Speaker and Rahm; thank you very much. I enjoyed sharing ideas with Members of Congress.

One of the things I wanted to tell the members very clearly was, one, I appreciate their service to the country. Oftentimes, their service and the service that their families provide is taken for granted, and I want them to know how much I appreciate a willingness to be in politics. Politics is hard. It's hard because of the campaign; it's hard, in many cases, because of the travel. These

are hard times because of the big issues we face. And so thank you for giving me a chance to come and share in a recognition that a lot of folks appreciate them, including the President.

Secondly, I enjoyed sharing some priorities. My message really was that these are big goals that Democrats care about and Republicans care about, and we've got to work hard to find ways to achieve big goals. And I also was pleased to take questions, and I thought the questions were very good and gave me a chance to share philosophy